



fighting heart disease
and stroke

european heart network

The missing heart attacks

April 2020

People suffering heart attacks during the Coronavirus outbreak may be putting their lives at risk by delaying seeking medical help.

In many European countries, people who show symptoms of heart attacks do not call an ambulance or go to the hospital. Data indicate that there is a decrease of up to 50% in the number of people presenting in hospitals and other health care facilities with symptoms of heart attacks or stroke.

Both Belgium and Germany have observed marked declines in the number of patients who come to clinics with acute stroke or heart attack symptoms, although there is currently no data on the numbers.

Recent data from hospitals across England show that the number of people seen in hospital with a suspected heart attack has halved since the beginning of March. This translates into 5,000 people every month with possible heart attack symptoms not being seen in emergency departments.

Data that is yet to be published from Italy indicate that at least 50% fewer heart attack patients were hospitalised during the peak of the Coronavirus crisis compared to the same period last year.

Also, in the Netherlands, fewer people have presented themselves in emergency rooms or at general practitioners with heart disease or stroke since the outbreak of the Coronavirus. Again, it is estimated that the drop in cases is around 50%.

Comprehensive data from Spain reflect a significant decrease in the number of interventional cardiology procedures performed as a consequence of COVID-19. The data show a 40% reduction in interventions in people with severe heart attacks.

Preliminary data from Sweden detect a decrease of 20-25% in numbers of heart attacks compared to the same period last year.

In Switzerland, emergency rooms and hospitals are quieter than usual despite an influx of COVID-19 patients. In one hospital in Lausanne, the number of patients with heart attacks has dropped by 35%. Across Switzerland, patients with stroke symptoms have fallen by a fifth.

Across Europe, it is suspected that the drop is not because fewer people have heart attacks or strokes, but that fewer people seek help. The reasons why people delay seeking help are likely a combination of being afraid of visiting hospitals, as they fear being exposed to the virus and contracting COVID-19, and being worried about putting even more pressure on the health care personnel and hospitals.

The situation is extremely worrying as postponing medical treatment will put thousands of people at greater risk of suffering long-term heart damage, needing intensive care, or even dying. It may also put even more pressure on the health care personnel and hospitals eventually. Therefore, everywhere, heart charities <http://www.ehnheart.org/covid-19.html> appeal to people not to be afraid to seek help.

Additionally, the lack of knowledge about the impact of the Coronavirus on the circulatory system is of great concern. Research is urgently needed so that people with COVID-19 can receive better treatment and be protected from damage to the heart. Research to that end needs to be carried out at an international level. More generally, research into better treatment of patients with heart and circulatory disease will help societies and health care systems to cope better with pandemics of infectious diseases.